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## **Making space: English women, letter-writing, and the life of the mind, c.1650-1750**

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**Making Space:**  
**English Women, Letter-Writing and the Life of the Mind,**  
**c.1650-1750**

**Leonie Hannan**

*This article uses women's letter-writing from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to explore the home as a site of female intellectual endeavour. Far from representing a static backdrop to the action of domestic life, the home played a dynamic role in women's experiences of the life of the mind and shaped the ways in which women thought and wrote. Letters were penned in dining rooms, parlours and closets, by firesides, and on desks and laps. In their letters, women projected images of themselves scribbling epistles to friends in order to maintain their mental intimacy. Space was both real and imagined and the physical realities of a hand-written and hand-delivered letter gave way to the imaginative possibilities brought by networks of epistolary exchange and the alternative spaces of creative thought. By reinstating the home more fully in the history of female intellectual experience, a more nuanced view of the domestic arena can be developed: one that sees the home not as a site of exclusion and confinement, but as a space for scholarship and exchange.*

**Introduction**

The eighteenth century is a period associated with an exponential growth in the cultivation of rational and scientific thought. Although men continued to dominate the halls of power and the institutions of cultural and intellectual note, a generation of

scholarship has now established the extent to which women participated in the developments of their age.<sup>1</sup> However, despite the richness of this work, in contrast to the post-1750 period, women's involvement in intellectual life during the years 1650–1750 remains comparatively under-researched.<sup>2</sup> This article will use detailed case studies of women's letter-writing from this period to explore the actual spaces of the home as a site of female intellectual activity. It will also consider the imaginary spaces opened up by epistolary exchange. The home was not just the static backdrop to women's cultural activities: rather, the domestic interior and its associated meanings were actively constituted and represented in a variety of ways in women's correspondence.

Correspondence collections have attracted increasing interest from historians and literary historians alike, and the pioneering work of scholars such as Susan Whyman has deepened our understanding of the epistolary cultures of the upper echelons, as well as the 'epistolary literacy' of the eighteenth-century working and 'middling' classes.<sup>3</sup> For the early modern period, James Daybell has highlighted the importance of letter collections as the 'most copious body of sixteenth-century English women's surviving writing', which offer 'a unique way into a female realm'.<sup>4</sup> The diverse scholarship on letter-writing has variously considered its connections to the literary world,<sup>5</sup> its role as a social and cultural force in national and global communications,<sup>6</sup> and its status as a genre of life writing.<sup>7</sup> By picking up a pen to write a letter, idle musings could be transformed into considered sentences, and passively absorbed meanings could become actively discussed ideas. Here, the processes and practice of letter-writing will be understood as a dynamic component in the development of ideas. Networks of intellectual exchange were created and maintained by dedicated letter-writing. Correspondence was also an instrument for

self-education and self-fashioning and provided the writer with the space to rehearse critical skills.

In many cases, women's letter-writing represented a complex mix of delivering news, requesting goods, discussing matters of household business, sending respects to relations, writing about ideas, and seeking to persuade others of their views. Moreover, moments of creativity or the assertion of a considered opinion could be prompted by otherwise day-to-day activities. Some letter-writers did engage consciously and concertedly in challenging correspondences with academically-minded friends, but there was no dominant format for intellectual expression.<sup>8</sup> It is the very diversity of the ways in which letters were written that points toward the individualised nature of the life of the mind and the versatility of the chosen medium for expression. In contrast to the assumptions of Eve Tavor Bannet, who suggests that letter-writing manuals were a key resource for the diversifying letter-writing public of the 'expanding mercantile empire',<sup>9</sup> the research undertaken for this study found little evidence that letters were strongly influenced by the reading of 'how-to' manuals.<sup>10</sup>

Five case studies have been chosen to illuminate a range of responses to the home as a space to develop the life of the mind. These examples were sourced from a larger research sample of correspondence and have been chosen because they document the period in question and represent diverse experiences of intellectual letter-writing at several junctures in the lifecycle.<sup>11</sup> As they appear in the article, the letter-writers include Jemima, Marchioness Grey; Mary Gregory (née Grey); and the bluestocking Catherine Talbot, here referred to collectively as the Grey circle. These letters were written in the 1740s, when the women were in their twenties and had comparative freedom to pursue intellectual activities. Dating from the seventeenth century is the correspondence of Mary Evelyn, wife of the famous diarist John

Evelyn, who wrote letters to a coterie of Oxford academics in the 1660s and early 70s; an unhappily married Oxfordshire gentlewoman, Anne Dormer, who wrote to her sister in the 1680s; and Mary Clarke, whose marital correspondence of the 1690s provides evidence of her interest in politics.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, the discussion turns to the wife of a vicar, Jane Johnson, who is best known to histories of childhood for her innovative schooling of her own children, and whose letters to her aunt date from the 1750s.<sup>13</sup>

### **Spatial Relationships and Spaces for Letter-Writing**

Spatial relationships for women, be that at home, in the street, or on the threshold, have recently been analysed for their evidence of how power relations operated and the ways in which gendered identities were formed.<sup>14</sup> In addition, over the last ten years, work on the study of the domestic interior by scholars such as Amanda Vickery and John Styles has illuminated the complex networks of meaning surrounding the ‘social life’ of domestic objects.<sup>15</sup> Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd have further identified the nineteenth-century home as ‘a sphere of self-expression, of emotional and psychological states’ and have contributed to a more nuanced perspective on female experience of the domestic: one that moves away from a simple image of constraint and confinement.<sup>16</sup> Instead of viewing objects simply as receptacles for, or representations of, contemporary cultural meaning, the role(s) that places and things played in shaping human lives, relationships and practices has been brought into focus.<sup>17</sup> Letter-writing represents just such a social practice, which was capable of shaping relationships, thought patterns, individual and group identities, or the pace and direction of academic exchange. As Laura Gowing has noted: ‘spatial practices always involve an interplay between the concrete and the imaginary.’<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as

Jennifer Summit has suggested, letter-writing was ‘perhaps the defining genre of the household’, one which allowed the coexistence of the material and the textual; the everyday and the intellectual.<sup>19</sup> The real and imagined spaces evoked in contemporary women’s familiar letter-writing are testament to the importance of both the material and the spatial in the realisation of intellectual exchange and in the shaping of female intellectual identity.

Some spaces within the eighteenth-century home were regarded as more suitable than others for completing personal correspondence or reading in private. Although dining rooms, drawing rooms, tables, and laps were all spaces where women read and wrote, the closet provided the most discrete space in which to engage in contemplative activities.<sup>20</sup> In 1741, on a trip to London, Jemima, Marchioness Grey wrote a letter to her friend, Catherine Talbot, describing the closet she had commandeered at a friend’s residence in the capital. Grey regarded the closet as a principle workspace within the home:

I have taken Possession of the Lady’s Closet, (which I may now again call Mine) & all her Papers & Books which strew the Floor, cover the Tea-Table & fill every other Table & Chair in the Room. So that after having committed great Devestations, displacing Drawers & laying out of the way many Curious Miscellanies, I have with some Difficulty found the Corner of a Table (which is at present cover’d with no less a Book than D<sup>r</sup> Middleton) to write upon.<sup>21</sup>

Grey’s description situates the closet as a functional space used by women for intellectual activities. Far from being just a small ante-room decorated, perhaps, in a feminine style, the closet was packed with ‘Books’, ‘Papers’ and ‘Miscellanies’ partially housed in ‘Drawers’ or on the ‘Table’, indicative of a room being daily used

for reading, writing, and thinking.<sup>22</sup> This view of the closet is corroborated by the seventeenth-century letter-writer and gentlewoman, Anne Dormer. Unlike the Grey circle, Dormer's domestic existence was fraught, as she negotiated an unhappy marriage to Robert Dormer in the gracious setting of Rousham House in Oxfordshire. In these circumstances, Dormer cited her closet as the only space in the house that was legitimately private and one she would use for preferred pastimes such as reading and writing. She pictured herself as someone intent on self-improvement, but ultimately thwarted by her life circumstances. In letters to her sister Elizabeth Trumbell, written in the 1680s, Dormer described her closet as a 'safe shelter' and complained that 'out of it is little quiett [sic] because he whose life is idleness [her husband] is seldom from home'.<sup>23</sup> The closet was clearly an important site for female reading and writing, whether this location was the only legitimate retreat in a contested domestic environment, or simply a conducive space for the undertaking of bookish pursuits.<sup>24</sup> Many letters, in fact, fail to mention the location in which they were written. However, where they exist, these descriptions allow valuable glimpses of women's preferred spaces for reading and writing and provide context for the closer analysis of intellectually motivated letter-writing.

### **The Grey Circle and the Rhythms of Self-Education**

In the 1740s, a group of three intellectually committed women engaged in a three-way correspondence in the hope that their exchange of ideas and programme of reading might continue to be shared despite their physical separation. These women were the aforementioned Jemima, Marchioness Grey (1723-97), her aunt Mary Grey (1719-61), and the diarist and bluestocking, Catherine Talbot (1721-70). At this time, Jemima Grey resided at Wrest Park in Bedfordshire, the ancestral home she and Mary

Grey had spent time in as children. Mary Grey lived with Catherine Talbot at the Reverend Thomas Secker's residence in Cuddesden, Oxfordshire.<sup>25</sup> The Reverend Thomas Secker had taken Catherine Talbot's mother, Mary, into his household when he married Catherine Benson, as Mary Talbot had been residing with Benson since her husband's death in 1720. The Talbots lived in his household until Secker's death in 1768, and in the early 1740s, Mary Grey joined Talbot there until her own marriage in 1743.<sup>26</sup> In the letters they exchanged, the surroundings they inhabited and the moods that those spaces encouraged were regularly described, and the rhythms of their daily existence were charted by the progress of their studies. At this time, Jemima Grey had been married to the studious and reserved Philip Yorke for five years.<sup>27</sup> Wealthy and wedded to a man who had worked with their single friend, Catherine Talbot, on a fictitious work on ancient Greece,<sup>28</sup> Grey's domestic context proved favourable to her pursuit of the life of the mind.<sup>29</sup> In a letter written in the autumn of 1744, twenty-two year-old Jemima Grey identified the times of the day that were hers alone, in contrast to those that were necessarily of a more public nature.

In this last Week which we have passed very quietly alone & sat every Evening mighty comfortably by the Library Fire, I have dispatched Machiavel's – History<sup>30</sup> you may suppose not Politics; & am going on to Guichardin's<sup>31</sup> which I find I must devour fast, being a pretty thick fat Volume & a small Print or I shall not get through it.<sup>32</sup>

Sometimes company intruded on her solitary studies, but reading could also be a shared activity:

In the Summer I seem to myself to read nothing, our afternoons have been spent just as last Year, which you know were all in Public. The Mornings I



had partly alone but when Miss Yorke was here, when they were employed in reading with her, Lucan,<sup>33</sup> some Athenians again, & various other Books.<sup>34</sup>

Grey told her friend that ‘my Time of devouring (as you call it) is the long Evenings’,<sup>35</sup> in which she:

read the latter part of Echard’s Roman History from the Cesars to the Destruction of the Byzantine Empire,<sup>36</sup> dull enough perhaps you may think, but I can’t say so; it was better than I expected & new to me which is always a Pleasure.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout, these letters are punctuated by references to demanding literature, which demonstrated that the women of the Grey circle were engaged in a programme of reading that would have been considered learned by male standards of the day. Classics, such as the Roman poet Lucan, featured alongside ‘modern’ classics of the likes of Machiavelli. Extensive histories, spiritual literature, philosophical works and contemporary fiction were all included in their scholarly schedule.

During the first half of the 1740s, the three friends were comparatively privileged in terms of free time, but this did not entirely remain the case throughout their life stages. By 1750, Mary Gregory (née Grey) had a family of four children and Jemima Grey had two daughters, the first born in 1751, and the second in 1756. During the 1740s, the letters often spanned several pages and were characterised by a sense of urgency to remain in meaningful contact: an important aspect of their mutual bond had lain in their shared reading. They tracked their own ‘Joint History’ through the books they had shared.<sup>38</sup> By the 1750s, this had changed.<sup>39</sup> Mary Gregory’s letters ceased to give detailed responses to her reading, and Jemima Grey’s commentary

tended to record contemporary cultural production, such as plays or newspaper reports, rather than literature that demanded more time to read. When asked by Talbot in 1752 how she spent her time, Grey replied: ‘like most other Folks, Eat, Drink & Sleep, & perhaps Read.’<sup>40</sup> An analysis of the contents of their letters revealed that, over time, the intellectual gave way to the familial as motherhood became a reality for two of the three women. Epistolary silences such as these often attest to the effect of life stage and changing circumstances on women’s freedom to participate in intellectual life; they can frequently be traced in surviving letter collections of this period.

### **Mary Evelyn, Domesticity and the Life of the Mind**

The mid-life picture of competing responsibilities and the ascendancy of the domestic routine within the Grey circle strikingly matched the experiences of other letter-writers of this period. In May 1668, Mary Evelyn (c.1635-1709), wife of the famous diarist, John Evelyn, described to her friend and intellectual confidante, Ralph Bohun,<sup>41</sup> the catalogue of demands on her time that hindered her letter-writing:

Do not impute my silence to neglect; had you seene me these tenne days continually entertaining persons of difficult humor, Age and sence, not only at meales, an afternoone, or the time of a civill visit, but from morning till night, you would be assured it was impossible for me to finish these few lines sooner, so often have I sett pen to paper, and ben taken off againe.<sup>42</sup>

The two correspondents had first come into contact in the 1660s via the arrangements for Evelyn’s son Jack’s education. To begin with, Bohun acted as home tutor to the young man and latterly as his mentor at the University of Oxford, where Bohun held a

position at New College. Their contact over Jack Evelyn's education flourished into an independent friendship and scholarly exchange, which culminated in Bohun habitually reading out Evelyn's letters to a group of Oxford academics, who appreciated her polished style and intelligent critiques of contemporary cultural production.<sup>43</sup> Never published, Evelyn represents an intriguing example of female involvement in academic life, as her letters to Bohun seem to belong to an older tradition of manuscript circulation.<sup>44</sup> This form of engagement with intellectual life was conducted from the home, maintained a respectable distance from the cash economy of publication, and attended, in part, to conventions of female modesty. However, by writing polished letters to Bohun, Evelyn consented to the informal distribution of her work amongst an academic milieu located in the distant, and exclusively male, scholarly environment of the University of Oxford. Evelyn's letter-writing made a contribution to the intellectual life of her period, as it was conceived of by those in positions of intellectual authority.

Nonetheless, the home had a significant presence in Evelyn's letter-writing, especially in terms of the challenges it posed to her freedom to think and write. In a letter to another male confidant, her cousin Samuel Tuke, Mary Evelyn gave one of her most illustrative descriptions of life in the Evelyn household. In December 1669, she conveyed the crisp quiet of the winter landscape, mirrored by the studious silence of the Evelyns at home:

You will not expect an account in this season of the yeare, how the flowers, and greens, prosper in the garden since they are candying, in snow; to be preserved for the spring, and our delights, confined, to the litle wooden Roome, which could yr perspective, reach, would for variety, be noe unpleasing diversion, then to see a Dull fire, cirled with a philosopher, a

woeman, and a child, heapes of bookes, our food, and entertainment, silence our law, soe strictly observed that neither Dog nor Cat dares transgresse it, The Crackling of the Ice, and whistling winds are our Musick, which if continued long in the same quarter may possibly freese our witts as well as our penns, though Apollo were himselfe amongst us, in fine the whole house containes not soe many living creatures in it, as Noahs Ark, and to looke out of the window, one would judge us unlikly to recover the habitable earth againe, yet still we live, and the dayes passe not the least part of our happinesse, though wee hardly disserve the name of Animalls, for wee neither feare, wish, nor Envie.<sup>45</sup>

Within Mary Evelyn's body of correspondence, this passage was unusual. In general her letters refrained from lengthy descriptions of the domestic sphere, preferring to mention in passing the nature of her role within the home. In many respects, Evelyn's letter-writing reached out more than it delved inward. Only in moments of crisis, such as the loss of a child, did Evelyn clearly reveal to others her introspection. On these occasions, the home and children abruptly moved into the foreground as she iterated the conflict between her roles in life. For example, in the same letter in which Evelyn blamed the constant presence of visitors for her failure to write, she also denigrated letter-writing as a suitable forum for academic exchange:

I wonder at nothing more then at the ambition of printing letters; since if the designe be to produce witt and learning, there is too litle scope for the one, and the other may be riduced to a lesse compasse then a sheet of guilt paper.<sup>46</sup>

This stiff dismissal of her chosen medium for intellectual expression was prompted by the intrusion of household duties on her space for contemplation. This pattern of intrusion and retreat can be traced through much of Evelyn's letter-writing to intellectual contacts. For Evelyn, the demands of household management and the rearing of children never sat entirely at ease with her ambitions to lead a life of learning. Nonetheless, she felt the pull of her household duties keenly. In the earlier years of Evelyn's marriage, she had discussed with her husband the prospect of founding a religious community: a monastic setting for the undertaking of quiet scholarship.<sup>47</sup> This vision could not have been much further removed from the realities of bringing up a family and maintaining an estate, which points to the duality in Evelyn's motivations and sense of identity. The quotation above constitutes a rare example of Evelyn describing, in a domestic setting, the enmeshed spheres of domesticity and intellectual pursuits. However, her letter-writing, as a body of work, was a product of this environment, and despite its demands, the home was the most influential location in Evelyn's experience of the life of the mind.

Despite the unconventional nature of Evelyn's letter-writing, she renounced her intellectual exchange with Bohun in the beginning of 1674, citing the practical pressures of her responsibilities as a wife, mother of four surviving children, and mistress of a household as deciding factors.<sup>48</sup> When Evelyn began to feel that she was not giving of her best she told Bohun: 'you will excuse If I judge so unrefinedly, who have the care of piggs, stilling, cakes, salves, sweet-meats, and such usfull things.'<sup>49</sup> Evelyn's husband during this time was ambivalent towards her intellectual endeavours, preferring to emphasise the importance of her role as a housewife.<sup>50</sup> A shorter than average letter addressed to Bohun discussing the work of poet, John Dryden, was concluded with the defence: 'this account perhaps is not sufficient to do

M<sup>r</sup> Dreiden right; yet is as much as you can expect from the leisure of one who has the care of a Nurcery.’<sup>51</sup> Bohun recognised Evelyn’s responsibilities to her family for the real threat that they were to their continued academic exchange and harked back to a time ‘before children & stilhouses were so much in y<sup>r</sup> thoughts.’<sup>52</sup> In January 1674, Evelyn made her withdrawal from this intellectually motivated correspondence final:

Do not think my silence hitherto has proceeded from being taken up by the diversities of the towne, the Esclat of the Court, Galantrie in clothes, ... should I confesse the reall cause it is yr expectation of extraordinary notions of things wholly out of my way, Women were not borne to read Authors and censure the learned...wee are willing to acknowledge all time borrowed from family duties is misspent, the care of Childrens education, observing a Husbands commands, assisting the sick relieving the poore, and being serviceable to our friends, these are of sufficient weight to employ the most improved capacities amongst us and if sometimes it happens by accident that one of a thousand aspires a litle higher, her fate commonly exposes her to wonder, but adds litle of esteeme, the distaff will defend as well as the sword, and the needle is as instructive as the penne.<sup>53</sup>

Evelyn would not write to Bohun on intellectual subjects again, and although Bohun understood her resolve, he pointed out that ‘tho all ye rest of ye shining perfections of her conversation or pen, may vanish into good-huswifery and ye management of Nursery affairs, yet this must still be inseparable from her.’<sup>54</sup> In this statement, Bohun argued that Evelyn’s intellectuality was embedded in her everyday lived existence, and therefore represented an integral part of her whole self.

### **Anne Dormer and the Psychology of Space**

Domestic space could provide the privacy and comfort in which to develop intellectual thought, but in letters of this period, the psychological implications of domestic space were also apparent. In the 1680s, gentlewoman Anne Dormer (c.1648-95) wrote frequently to her sister Elizabeth Trumbull, and her letters brought to life the impact that Dormer's environment had on her ability to pursue contemplative activities. Anne and Elizabeth were daughters of Sir Charles Cotterell, a high-ranking courtier of King Charles II. Anne Cotterell married into the Royalist Dormer family, while her sister married William Trumbull in 1670 and lived abroad with her husband, first in Paris and later in Constantinople during Trumbull's tenure as Ambassador.<sup>55</sup> It was this circumstance of separation that led to a regular correspondence during the late 1680s. For Dormer, like many of the letter-writers considered here, physical and mental spaces were interconnected. As discussed above, the closet was an important private space for Anne Dormer. At times, it became a place of hiding, as Dormer reported that her movements about the house were monitored by her controlling husband:

my Ld has as constant a watch over my steps as ever and can tell exactly how many will carry me from my chamber to the garden and if I happen to stopp one minute I am sure to be askt the reason.<sup>56</sup>

Although Robert Dormer's influence over his wife became a focus in Anne Dormer's letters to her sister, the house itself assumed a significant presence in the narrative of the correspondence. For Dormer, the spaces of the home affected her psychological well-being. She complained simultaneously of rooms being too hot and others too cold for her to find the peace of mind she required for reading. In reference to her old bedroom she commented:

had I continued there...now I had beene a most miserable creature because all the comfort I have in writing and reading which the torment I then had perpetually in my head and the dimness of my eyes with vapours made it almost impossible for me to do.<sup>57</sup>

Reasserting the link between domestic space and emotional and physical well-being, Anne Dormer emphasised the importance she placed on reading and writing. Dormer also used descriptions of herself reading in private to promote an image of pious retirement, one that strengthened her moral high ground when she tackled issues such as marriage and gender roles.<sup>58</sup> In November c.1688, drawing on the Old Testament, Dormer equated her own trials in marriage to those of the Israelites:

I was indeed some time in the case of the children of israel who when they were cruelly oppressed could not for sometime by reason of their bondage consider the message they received from Moses but after a time they saw they intended them a reall deliverance and in this of mine I am I thank God at last delivered from placing any delight in the varieties of the world, I see those who studdy to find happyness in it are like the disciples who toile all day and catch nothing.<sup>59</sup>

However, even after the death of Dormer's husband, whom she had described as the principal source of her personal unhappiness, the house they had shared took on an air of prohibition in her letters.

when I am going up and downe his house and using such things as he would scarce suffer me to look upon, I am I think like one haunted with an evill spirit or who has committed some crime.<sup>60</sup>



To explain her personal unhappiness to her sister, she not only had to place herself in the context of the home but also had to demonstrate the home's effect upon her.

In the letters written by the Grey circle, Mary Evelyn and Anne Dormer, intellectual intent is certainly apparent, but in addition, they share a distinct preoccupation with the home. For the Grey circle, the spaces in which they worked were keenly described as an aid to mental proximity. For Evelyn and Dormer, the spaces of the home held competing demands for their time or attention, but were nonetheless embedded in their experiences of the life of the mind. These examples demonstrate the strong influence exerted by the physical spaces in which these women lived, read, wrote and worked.

### **Epistolarity's Imagined and Creative Spaces**

The domestic environment (despite household management, children, husbands and visitors) could act as a location of knowledge production, but letter-writing also made accessible the possibilities of imagined spaces and alternative communities. Correspondence networks could connect distant individuals and facilitate exchange, generating alternative spaces within which women could operate. Women's intellectual lives were, therefore, not only rooted in the domestic spaces they inhabited, but also located in the virtual spaces of epistolary exchange.<sup>61</sup>

Whilst Anne Dormer reacted negatively to many of the spaces she inhabited, other letter-writers of this period used descriptions of themselves in their environment with a more positive effect in mind. When Jemima, Marchioness Grey, moved away from her two friends, Mary Grey and Catherine Talbot, in the summer of 1740, the urge to maintain the intimacy of close friendship between the three women was made explicit in their correspondence. Upon her marriage, Jemima Grey returned to the

family home, Wrest Park, in Bedfordshire. She now walked about the same rooms, corridors and gardens that she and her aunt had inhabited as children, and this provided a link between the two women's shared past as they moved on into young adult life. In her letters, Mary Grey stressed that the more detailed the description Jemima Grey could furnish, the greater the mental intimacy that could be achieved between the separated friends. She demanded: 'make me as present by the exactness of your account as I can possibly be at forty miles distance'.<sup>62</sup>

Imagining a fellow correspondent *accurately* in the space they inhabited was perceived as an aid to intimacy, the absence of this mental image deemed a sign of true separation. Yorkshire gentlewoman, Eliza Worsley, writing to her sister Frances Robinson in the 1740s, wrote emotively about her efforts to maintain closeness through physical separation:

I have a lock of your hair in my hands about ten times in a day, besides your Whole image is wrote in great Capital Letters in my heart.<sup>63</sup>

To help her sister imagine her at home, she wrote a description of herself writing letters by the fireside:

I do assure you my Dearest Fanny I never mis an opportunity that I have time to write, but I told you in my last how much I set by y<sup>e</sup> dineing room fire: I am fix't their till one a clock every day sometimes by chance I get away half an hour sooner ... see I have not so much time as you imagine: so that if Hovingham be like the Town in Tripely turn'd into stone you may know where to find me when you come over.<sup>64</sup>

This was in part a defence of her diligence in corresponding, a habit her sister did not share. However, it represented more than that: as Worsley felt the intimacy of first-person contact disappearing through an irregular and unreliable correspondence with her absent sister, she relied increasingly on descriptions of her life and those of their friends and relatives. Desperate not to lose their emotional proximity entirely, Worsley offered her sister a view into her life: personal, visual, and quotidian.

Letters of this period provide an insight into the spaces of the home and the ways in which these environments influenced women's thinking and working lives. However, correspondence could also provide a forum for forays into the imagination. As a form of escapism, letter-writing did not always root its participants in their daily reality, but offered the possibility of breaking free of its limits. Mary Clarke, of Chipley in Somerset, wrote letters to her husband from 1675 until the early 1700s as he was frequently away from home attending to his duties as MP for Taunton and Clarke was left with the management of the estate. However, her interest in parliamentary politics brought Clarke's letter-writing out of her immediate surroundings and onto a more inventive plain. Mary Clarke had a playful imagination and her letters make for lively reading. Clarke demonstrated a sense of comic timing when switching from the political heavy-weight to the trifling:

me thinkes it should Concern us as much to preserve the Lives and fortunes of those that are alredy protestants as to take Care to bringe up Little new protestants before we know what will become of these, but stay, I shall say to much by and by of what I dont understand, and thearefore I will now come to the subiectt of toppnotts.<sup>65</sup>

In a letter dated 22 October 1694, Clarke told her husband about her recent bout of ill health. At first, she described herself at home trying to manage the pain in her kidney. She documented the measures she had employed to treat herself, chiefly drinking water from therapeutic springs ‘in the Gallery window by my Chamber’.<sup>66</sup> Talk of this treatment provoked Clarke to imagine she had left her chamber and ‘phancey I am att the bath Gallary that lookes in-to the hall which I phancey to be the Cross bath’.<sup>67</sup> As if to give Edward Clarke a more intimate view into their home life, Clarke described her incorporation of their children into her fantasy of taking the waters at Bath, saying, ‘I take as much pleasure in teaching summy to Goe as the fine ladyes doe in the hopes of having such by drinking the waters.’<sup>68</sup> The letter seems at once designed to entertain (her husband and herself) and provide a portrait of the family life he missed whilst away from home. For Mary Clarke, both the real and imagined spaces of the home were considered valid subjects for the letters she wrote to her husband, and the correspondence evokes her humour, creativity and sense of intimacy.

Women who actively engaged with thinking life in this period were often analytical about the processes that led them to do so. For letter-writer Jane Johnson (1706-59), correspondence with her aunt in the 1750s provided a space to explore themes of spiritual importance. Johnson, a mother and the wife of a vicar living in Olney, Buckinghamshire, in the first half of the eighteenth century, is more well-known for having channelled her creative talents into the education of her children.<sup>69</sup> Her letters to her aunt, Mrs Brompton, provide further evidence of Johnson’s inventive mental world. For Johnson, the realm of the imagination held a strong allure, and she used a report of a dream to open a lengthy letter to Brompton. Johnson wrote on 28 February 1756:

I Dream'd last night that (Arachne like) I was Metamorphosed into a spider as big as the full moon, & sat upon a Throne in the Center of a Web of my own spinning as Large as Lincolns-Inn-Fields.<sup>70</sup>

She interpreted this dream as a sign she should write to her friend and aunt, Mrs Brompton:

As soon as I awaked, I wonder'd what this extraordinary Dream should portend, & not having any Magician, Astrologer, Soothsayer, or Children to resort to, explain'd it my self, to signifie, that I must this day spin out of my Brains a Long Letter to Dear M<sup>rs</sup> Brompton.<sup>71</sup>

This letter reveals Johnson's strong, even sub-conscious, urge to create. The letter is in part work of fantasy and in part testimony to her own, private, impulse to take up the pen. By beginning her letter with the content of a dream, Johnson immediately placed her writing in an alternative sphere. These letters created spaces in which Johnson could explore themes that confronted her in everyday life with the use of allegory and semi-fictional elaboration. Letters written by women of this period were often prosaic and practical in their communications, but as examples such as this demonstrate that the epistolary form could be transformed into a much more imaginative and intellectually enlivening medium. As Johnson sat at her writing desk in a closet of her home, she transported herself and her reader into spaces outside of the domestic and the everyday.

## **Conclusion**

An emerging narrative on women letter-writers and the life of the mind in this period is one of opportunities and obstacles unevenly distributed among the literate population. Although the sample presented here is too limited to make decisive conclusions about change over time, the experiences of the seventeenth-century case studies of Evelyn and Dormer seem qualitatively different from the vibrant intellectual lives of the young Grey circle writing in the mid-eighteenth century. Personal circumstances undoubtedly played a critical role, but greater access to printed material brought by the gains in print culture of the eighteenth century must have broadened opportunities for motivated and literate woman.<sup>72</sup> Individual circumstances altered as women negotiated, among other things, the rigours of changing life stages. In the collections illustrated here, there is no example of an older woman returning to her studies, with the pressures of child-rearing behind her, but doubtless such examples exist. Women were pragmatic and flexible in their approach to the life of the mind, participating in debates and challenging exchanges when and where they could. However, a key channel for intellectual participation was the practice of letter-writing through which geographical distances and physical separation were bridged.

Writing letters was for many women of the moneyed classes a daily activity and therefore embedded in the routines of the household. Letter-writing took place in the home, and it is therefore important to note that the domestic was much more than a static backdrop to life; its features, location, requirements, and inhabitants had an important impact on the thinking lives of women. Letters escaped the familial nest and linked women to other 'spaces' or networks of exchange. Women's descriptions of the spaces they inhabited brought them closer to absent friends. Space was also psychological, and the extremes of solitude or absence of privacy affected letter-

writers' emotional health. The closet was also an important, and legitimate, space for female, private study across the period 1650-1750. The home, then, was not a place of exclusion but a site of female intellectual activity, and via the postal network, one that was easily connected with other sites of academic endeavour.

The real and imagined spaces of female intellectual life, as explored through epistolary culture, had a significant influence on women's mental lives. Women used the spaces of the home, literally and imaginatively, to forge a life of the mind. By examining intellectuality through spatiality, the everyday processes and practices of women's thinking lives can be uncovered, and it is on these foundations that a more representative history of female intellectual life can begin to be built.

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<sup>1</sup> Works include H. L. Smith (Ed) (1998) *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); P. McDowell (1998) *The Women of Grub Street: press politics and gender in the London literary marketplace, 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press); C. Hesse (2005) *Women Intellectuals in the Enlightened Republic of Letters: Introduction* in S. Knott & B. Taylor (Eds) *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan), pp. 259-64; J. Daybell (2006) *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); and J. Wallwork & P. Salzman (Eds) (2011) *Early Modern Englishwomen Testing Ideas* (Farnham: Ashgate) is a recent contribution to the broad scholarship on important individuals such as Mary Astell and Margaret Cavendish.

<sup>2</sup> The following are just a few of the titles dealing with similar themes, but for the period 1750 onwards: H. Guest (2000) *Small Change: women, learning, patriotism, 1750-1810* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press); A. Vickery (Ed) (2001) *Women, Privilege and Power: British politics, 1750 to the present* (Stanford:

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Stanford University Press); S. Morgan (Ed) (2002) *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750-1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan); M. Hilton (2007) *Women and the Shaping of the Nation's Young: education and public doctrine in Britain, 1750-1850* (Aldershot: Ashgate); and J. Pearson (1999) *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: a dangerous recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>3</sup> S. E. Whyman (1999) *Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England: the cultural worlds of the Verneys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); S. E. Whyman (2009) *The Pen and the People: English letter writers, 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

<sup>4</sup> Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> R. Perry (1980) *Women, Letters and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press); T. F. Berg (2006) *The Lives and Letters of an Eighteenth-Century Circle of Acquaintance* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

<sup>6</sup> R. Earle (Ed) (1999) *Epistolary Selves: letters and letter-writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate); C. Brant (2006) *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan); J. How (2003) *Epistolary Spaces: English letter-writing from the foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's Clarissa* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

<sup>7</sup> M.M. Dowd & J.A. Eckerle (2007) *Genre and Women's Life-Writing in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate); P. Coleman, J. Lewis & J. Kowalik (Eds) (2000) *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the diversity and complexity of epistolary culture see Brant *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture*.



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<sup>9</sup> E. Tavor Bannet (2005) *Empire of Letters: letter manuals and transatlantic correspondence, 1688-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> See R. Chartier (1997) 'Introduction: An Ordinary Kind of Writing', in R. Chartier, A. Boureau & C. Dauphin (Eds) *Correspondence: models of letter-writing from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 1-23.

<sup>11</sup> The larger research sample included over 4,000 letters, taken from twenty main letter collections, and formed the basis for a doctoral thesis: L. Hannan (2009) *Women, Letter-Writing and the Life of the Mind in England, c.1650-1750* (PhD. University of London).

<sup>12</sup> Examples of female engagement with intellectual life are evident widely in the middling and upper classes, but appear in much greater numbers amongst the more leisured for reasons of availability of free time, access to books, and opportunity, see Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, for illustration of the use of letter-writing by middling sort English women as a tool of self-expression.

<sup>13</sup> See E. Arizpe & M. Styles (2006) *Reading Lessons from the Eighteenth Century: mothers, children and texts* (Shenstone: Pied Piper).

<sup>14</sup> L. Gowing (2000) 'The freedom of the streets': women and social space, 1560-1640, in P. Griffiths & M. Jenner (Eds) *Londinopolis: essays in the cultural and social history of early modern London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 131. See also J. Rendall, N. Penner & I. Borden (Eds) (2000) *Gender Space Architecture: an interdisciplinary introduction* (London: E & FN Spon).

<sup>15</sup> J. Styles and A. Vickery (Eds) (2006) *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (London: Yale University Press). For women and material culture, see J. Batchelor & C. Kaplan (Eds) (2007) *Women and Material*

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*Culture, 1660-1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan); M. Daly Goggin & B. Fowkes Tobin (Eds) (2009) *Women and Things, 1750-1950: gendered material strategies* (Farnham: Ashgate).

<sup>16</sup> I. Bryden & J. Floyd (Eds) (1999) *Domestic Space: reading the nineteenth-century interior* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> L. Weatherill (1988) *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (London: Routledge).

<sup>18</sup> Gowing, 'The freedom of the streets', in Griffiths & Jenner (Eds) *Londinopolis*, p. 147.

<sup>19</sup> J. Summit (2004) Hannah Wolley, The Oxinden Letters, and Household Epistolary Practice, in N.E. Wright, M.W. Ferguson & A.R. Buck (Eds) *Women, Property, and the Letters of the Law in Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 202.

<sup>20</sup> T. Chico (2005) *Designing Women: the dressing room in eighteenth-century English literature and culture* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press); K. Lipsedge (2006) 'Enter into thy Closet': women, closet culture, and the eighteenth-century English novel, in Styles & Vickery (Eds) *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture*, pp. 107-22.

<sup>21</sup> Bedfordshire and Luton Archive (BLA), Lucas Papers (LP), L 30/9a/3, f. 64: Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, 6 June 1741 [copy].

<sup>22</sup> D. Goodman (2009) *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (London: Cornell University Press), pp. 199-244.

<sup>23</sup> British Library (BL), Trumbull Papers (TP), Add MS 72516, f. 159: Anne Dormer to Elizabeth Trumbull, 8 Aug c.1686.

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the closet as a ‘private’ space see J. Sanders (2003) ‘The Closet Opened’: a reconstruction of ‘private’ space in the writings of Margaret Cavendish’, in S. Clucas (Ed) *A Princely Brave Woman: essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, pp. 127-40.

<sup>25</sup> During childhood, it was Secker who encouraged Talbot in her studies and supervised her broad education. However, it has been argued that the combination of Talbot’s role as his housekeeper and personal secretary, and Secker’s powerful personality and public standing, undermined Talbot’s intellectual self-confidence; see Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB) online, [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com).

<sup>26</sup> Mary Grey married Oxford academic, Dr David Gregory, who as a young man, in 1724, had become the first professor in history and modern languages at the University of Oxford.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Yorke (1720-90) had a strong interest in literature and history and became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1741 and in 1744 a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

<sup>28</sup> P. Yorke (1741) *Athenian Letters* (London: James Bettenham).

<sup>29</sup> J. Godber (1968) *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park* (Bedfordshire: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society), p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> N. Machiavelli (1531) *Discorsi* (Rome: Antonio Blado).

<sup>31</sup> Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540), friend and critic of Niccolò Machiavelli, and a celebrated political writer of the Italian Renaissance in his own right.

<sup>32</sup> BLA, LP, L 30/9a/1, f. 40: Jemima Grey to Mary Grey, 30 Oct. 1744 [copy].

<sup>33</sup> Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (39AD-65AD), the Roman poet.

<sup>34</sup> BLA, LP, L 30/9a/1, f. 40: Jemima Grey to Mary Grey, 30 Oct. 1744 [copy].

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>36</sup> This referred to the two-volume history by the British historian, Laurence Echard (c.1670-1730), *The Roman History from the Building of the City to the Perfect Settlement of the Empire by Augustus Caesar*, Vol. 1 (1724); and *The Roman History from the Settlement of the Empire by Augustus Caesar*, Vol. 2 (1724).

<sup>37</sup> BLA, LP, L 30/9a/1, ff. 40-1. Jemima Grey to Mary Grey, 30 Oct. 1744 [copy].

<sup>38</sup> BLA, LP, letter 448: same to same, 7 Oct. 1742 [modern transcript].

<sup>39</sup> For a fuller analysis of the impact of life stage on intellectual engagement for the Grey circle and others, see Hannan (2009) *Women, Letter-Writing and the Life of the Mind* (PhD. University of London).

<sup>40</sup> BLA, LP, L 30/9a/6, f. 102: Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, 28 Sept. 1752.

<sup>41</sup> Ralph Bohun (c.1639-1716) published in 1671 *Discourse Concerning the Origine and Properties of Wind: with an historical account of hurricanes, and other tempestuous winds* (Oxford: Tho. Bowman) and became rector of West Kington, Wiltshire, in 1674; see *ODNB* online, [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com).

<sup>42</sup> BL, EP, Add MS 78539: Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, 21 May c.1668.

<sup>43</sup> Ralph Bathurst (1620-1704) was the central character in Evelyn's Oxford audience. A physician and cleric at Trinity College, his friends and colleagues included luminaries such as Robert Boyle.

<sup>44</sup> J. Stevenson (2000) *Women Writing and Scribal Publication in the Sixteenth Century*, in P. Beal & M.J.M. Ezell (Eds) *English Manuscript Studies, 1100-1700* (London: British Library).

<sup>45</sup> BL, EP, Add MS 78435, f. 60: Mary Evelyn to Samuel Tuke, c.Dec. 1669.

<sup>46</sup> BL, EP, Add. MS 78539: Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, 21 May 1668.

<sup>47</sup> See F. Harris (2002) *Transformations of Love: the friendship of John Evelyn and Margaret Godolphin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 64-90.

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<sup>48</sup> For the domestic duties undertaken by gentlewomen see R. Baird (2003) *Mistress of the House: great ladies and grand houses, 1670-1830* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson) and A. Vickery (1998) *The Gentleman's Daughter: women's lives in Georgian England* (London: Yale University Press).

<sup>49</sup> BL, EP, Add MS 78539: Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, 23 Nov 1674.

<sup>50</sup> Harris, *Transformations of Love*.

<sup>51</sup> BL, EP, Add MS 78539: Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, 27 Feb 1671.

<sup>52</sup> BL, EP, Add MS 78435: Ralph Bohun to Mary Evelyn, 26 Jan 1675/6.

<sup>53</sup> BL, EP, Add MS 78539: Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, 4 Jan 1673/4.

<sup>54</sup> BL, EP, Add MS 78435: Ralph Bohun to Mary Evelyn, 26 Jan 1675/6.

<sup>55</sup> See R. Clark (1938) *Sir William Trumbull in Paris, 1685-86* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) and ODNB online, [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com).

<sup>56</sup> BL, TP, Add MS 72516, f. 193: Anne Dormer to Elizabeth Trumbull, 3 Nov c.1688.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., f. 192.

<sup>58</sup> See E. Longfellow (2004) *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>59</sup> BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, f. 193: Anne Dormer to Elizabeth Trumbull, 3 Nov. c.1688.

<sup>60</sup> BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, f. 202: same to same, St James' Day (25 July) c.1689.

<sup>61</sup> S. C. Chambers (2003) Letters and Salons: women reading and writing the nation, in S. Castro-Klarén & J. C. Chasteen (Eds) *Beyond Imagined Communities: reading and writing the nation in nineteenth-century Latin America* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press); How, *Epistolary Spaces*.

<sup>62</sup> BLA, LP, L 30/9/53/3: Mary Grey to Jemima Grey, 17 Aug. 1740.

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<sup>63</sup> West Yorkshire Archive (WYA), Newby Hall Papers, NH 2828/34: Eliza Worsley to Frances Robinson, 1 Oct. 1742.

<sup>64</sup> WYA, NH 2825/12: Eliza Worsley to Frances Robinson, 24 Feb 1749.

<sup>65</sup> Somerset Archive and Record Office (SARO), Sanford Estate Collection (SEC), DD\SF/7/1/31, f. 19: Mary Clarke to Edward Clarke, 13 Dec 1690.

<sup>66</sup> SARO, SEC, DD\SF/7/1/31, f. 29: same to same, 22 Oct 1694.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Arizpe & Styles, *Reading Lessons*.

<sup>70</sup> Bodleian, MS Don c190, f. 13: Jane Johnson to Mrs Brompton, 28 Feb 1756.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> I. Rivers (1982) *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press).